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The Qualification Portability in Vocational Education: Evidence from Uzbekistan's International Mobility Reforms

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Abstract

General Background A vocational qualification must retain its structural cross-border value by ensuring receiving employers can easily interpret and verify a graduate's actual competency evidence. **Specific Background** Between 2018 and 2025, Uzbekistan introduced critical institutional components, including updated qualification frameworks, dual learning legislation, expanded foreign language provision, and digital employment services. **Knowledge Gap** Previous scholarly research has focused heavily on isolated training volumes and general migration links, failing to provide an integrated measure of comprehensive institutional readiness for cross-border credential recognition. **Aims** This study evaluates the capacity of Uzbekistan's professional education system to generate foreign-recognized credentials for middle-skilled labor and designs a structured architecture to connect these systemic functions. **Results** Utilizing a six-function diagnostic tool, the Qualification Portability Readiness Index recorded an institutional increase from 8.3 points in 2018 to 91.7 points in 2025, although active admissions covered only 71.4% of cataloged occupations. **Novelty** This article develops an original three-tier architecture that directly links external recognition benchmarks, verified workplace portfolios, independent competency assessments, and digitally traceable credentials. **Implications** Future educational policies must shift from independent international program expansion toward an interoperable recognition chain supported by occupation-specific portability files and consent-based digital skills passports.

Keywords: Qualification Portability, Vocational Education, International Recognition, Occupational Language, Uzbekistan

Key Findings Highlights

An institutional index maps a rise in qualification portability readiness from 8.3 to 91.7 points between 2018 and 2025.

The national classifier achieved a 71.4% operationalization ratio across active vocational training programs.

A new system structures data across recognition standards, workplace portfolios, and digital passports.

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1. Introduction

For a vocational qualification to retain its value after a worker crosses a border, the receiving employer must be able to answer three practical questions: what the graduate can do, how that competence was assessed, and whether the evidence is authentic. While a diploma may be officially recognized in the home country, it is of little value abroad if the intended learning outcomes and assessment rules are less than transparent — or in cases where the relationship between such assessments and the destination occupations cannot be clearly articulated. It goes beyond formal non-recognition, though; it is a potential failure of translation and institutional trust. The Organisation for Economic Co-operation and Development (OECD) still links migrants' job misalignment to recognition procedures, licensing requirements and language limitations.

[1] The United Nations Educational, Scientific and Cultural Organization likewise places transparent qualifications, employer relevance, and flexible learning pathways at the center of modern technical and vocational education and training.[2]

In this article, qualification portability refers to the ability of a vocational credential to present a graduate's competence in a form that an external employer, assessor, or public authority can understand and verify. Portability is created by a series of connected agreements: national standards need to reflect destination occupations; curricula should make relevant outcomes explicit; language preparation must fit the job; workplace experience needs to be documented; competence should be measured independently; and the end credential must provide traceable information. An interruption along the line lessens the business sway of the capability. If theory lies at the foundation of human-capital theory, the logic behind training raising productivity and earnings, but returns only come in when there are measures of competence which can be transferable to those sections of the labor market where it is applied.[3,4]

The issue is particularly severe for middle-skilled labor. Despite not requiring university degrees, for the most part, employers in occupations such as technical, construction, logistics and manufacturing industries, service and care all demand firm proof of practical ability to get on-site safety knowledge and language competence skills and prior experience. In the absence of that evidence, or if it is unclear how to interpret it, a trained worker can experience what we call "qualification discounting," whereby the skills do exist but are treated by the labor market as unproven or not equivalent. The expected outcome is underwork at levels below the training received by the employee, resulting in lower productivity as well as less economic and social-protection gains than organized mobility was designed to produce.

Uzbekistan has put together a lot of the institutional building blocks that might narrow this discount. In 2019, professional education was restructured; in 2020, education and employment acquired a legal basis; in 2021, dual education was introduced by law; and reforms during the period of 2024-2025 broadened components responsible for national qualifications levels, international programs implementation, foreign-language instruction and vocational educational pathways targeted to mobility. [5–12] Administrative records indicate wider availability of international and joint programs, inclusion of certain international qualifications in the classifier, and broader language and workplace-learning coverage. However expansion is not to be mistaken with mobility. A curriculum may be international but without a destination-approved assessment, a language course may create occupational proficiency rather than fluency, and if no standardized portfolio records workplace practice it remains invisible.

The main focus of research on Uzbekistan has been either vocational modernization, labor-market alignment or training-migration links. These studies illuminate key aspects of the reform process, but they do not address a more discrete systems question: Were the reforms introduced in 2018-2025 sufficient for rendering national vocational learning into evidence that a foreign employer can read, compare and verify?

Accordingly, the study evaluates the institutional readiness of Uzbekistan's vocational education system to produce portable qualifications for middle-skilled international mobility. It also identifies the points at which a strong training reform can still lose value before recognition abroad.

2. Methods

Study design and evidence base. Because the research question concerns the qualification system rather than individual migrant outcomes, the analysis follows institutional change longitudinally from 2018 to 2025. The unit of analysis is the national process that connects vocational institutions, qualification authorities, assessment bodies, employers, language providers, and migration agencies. Evidence was drawn from legislation and policy acts, administrative information supplied by the Ministry of Higher Education, Science and Innovation, the Migration Agency, and the Ministry of Employment and Poverty Reduction, together with the consolidated statistical materials used in the underlying dissertation research.[13–15]

Qualification Portability Readiness Index. Six functions were then added as they represent one point at which a qualification can gain and/or lose acceptance external to the system of issuance: (1) national qualification architecture; (2) access to international curricula or externally legible qualifications; (3) occupation-specific foreign-language requirements; (4) production and legal recording of evidence from workplace learning experiences; (5) independent arrangements for assessment recognition, or endorsement, with occupational issuers; and (6) digital traceability permitting employer identification. It scored 0 if no integrated mechanism could be described, 0.5 if only a legal basis or pilot or limited institutional implementation was documented and scored 1 when implementation operated at national or multiregional scale for each year. Ambiguous evidence was rated conservatively at the lower value.

For each year, the six function scores were aggregated as follows:

$$QPRI_t = (100/6) \times \sum S_{jt}$$

That is: $QPRI_t = 1/n \sum_{j=0}^n (S_{jt})$ The equal weighting was a conservative assumption and not an assertion that all functions have the same effect. The need for empirical weights remained unsatisfied through the documentary evidence and employing judgmental weights would have resulted in fictitious accuracy. That is, the index measures availability of institutional functions, not program quality and individual competence and employer acceptance or causal impact on employment.

Operational-capacity analysis. The same six functions were then used to structure data on administrative indicators for 2025 in order to test whether formal readiness had been converted into delivery capacity. The calculative domains addressed the percentage of the qualification catalog that was backed by active admissions, distribution of language participation, distance between planned and probable hours in languages and average coverage for dual learning. The analysis conducted here provides an independent question, data structure, and outcome framework and therefore excluded migration-flow regression results and specialized-center placement data used in previous studies.

Figure development. Quantitative results were translated into a three-layer architecture to represent where recognition is truly generated. The lowest level defines the external benchmark through which a qualification will be interpreted; the next logs the evidence generated through curriculum, language, workplace learning and assessment; and finally that evidence is packaged into a credential that an employer can check. This sequence indicates that cross-border recognition results from collective decisions, rather than a formal administrative stamp.

Ethics. The study relied exclusively on aggregated administrative and documentary sources. It involved no interviews, experiments, health information, or personally identifiable records; consequently, institutional ethics approval and informed consent were not required.

3. Results

3.1. Institutional Readiness, 2018-2025

The coding does not show a smooth annual rise; it shows a sequence in which different foundations were added at different times (Table 1). Policy measures in 2018 centred on labour migration and private employment channels, yet the vocational system had no integrated pathway from training to cross-border recognition. The reorganisation of training in 2019 formalized and made the structure of professional education more robust, and established a stronger basis for occupational classification and program redesign. New laws passed in 2020 streamlined the enabling legislation for education, employment, and safe mobility; while a dual-education regulation adopted in 2021 established workplace learning as a functioning basis of evidence.

After 2021, progress became uneven. Rather, activities remained partial through 2023: international curriculum alignment, occupation-specific language preparation and digital verification. In 2024, however, the reforms focused simultaneously on the national qualification system, international education programs and gathered language support, assessment and organized employment-abroad pathways. With the addition of joint-program rules, international qualifications in the classifier and wider language provision — all which moved pilot functions to operation in 2025 —, this bumped up the index to 91.7 points on a scale of 100. [16,17]

The result of 91.7 points needs to be read cautiously. It does not mean that 91.7% of the Uzbek qualifications already have international value; rather, there were five functions working at all and a sixth—digital traceability—was partially operational. Consequently, the remaining weakness is around integration and quality assurance. There are education and foreign-employment platforms, but no single graduate-level record of learning outcomes, language results, workplace evidence, assessment and the recognition decision made by the destination yet.

Table 1. Qualification Portability Readiness Index and institutional milestones, 2018-2025

Year	Main institutional evidence	Six-function coding N/I/L/W/A/D	QPRI, points
2018	Migration and private-employment reforms existed, but portability functions were still separate.	0.5/0/0/0/0/0	8.3
2019	Professional education was reorganized, strengthening the national qualification base.	1/0/0/0/0/0	16.7
2020	Education and employment laws consolidated the legal framework; no additional function reached full operation.	1/0/0/0/0/0	16.7
2021	Dual education made workplace learning an operational part of the system.	1/0/0/1/0/0	33.3
2022	Labor law improved the recording of work experience, while cross-border recognition remained limited.	1/0/0/1/0/0	33.3
2023	Language and quality modernization appeared as partial, strategy-level functions.	1/0/0.5/1/0/0	41.7
2024	Qualification reform, international programs, language support, assessment, and mobility pathways expanded together.	1/0.5/0.5/1/1/0.5	75.0
2025	International and joint programs became operational; language integration widened, while digital linkage remained incomplete.	1/1/1/1/0.5	91.7

Figure 1.

Note: N = national qualification architecture; I = international curriculum/credential; L = occupational-language integration; W = workplace evidence; A = independent assessment/recognition; D = digital traceability. Scores: 0 = absent, 0.5 = legal basis/pilot/limited implementation, 1 = operational at national or multiregional scale. QPRI = Qualification Portability Readiness Index. Source: Author's documentary coding.

3.2. Operational Capacity and Portability Gaps in 2025

Administrative capacity in 2025 presents a more mixed picture than the index alone (Table 2). The national classifier listed 461 occupations and qualifications, whereas active admissions covered 329, an operationalization ratio of 71.4%.[13] The difference matters: formal inclusion in a classifier does not guarantee an institution capable of teaching the program, providing equipment, or offering a credible route to assessment.

Internationalization was visible in two forms. Sixteen international occupations and qualifications entered the classifier for the 2025/2026 academic year. At the delivery level, international and joint programs operated in 47 technicums across 30 occupations and involved more than 4,000 learners. Pearson BTEC qualifications were introduced in 14 technicums, and 15 institutions joined a German-standard nursing pathway for 758 learners.[13] These are meaningful signs of scale, but the label of an international program is only the beginning. Portability still relies on external verification, a clear credential supplement, and an actual acceptance decision by an employer or competent authority in the destination country.

There was a wide reach for foreign-language provision, but low intensity. Another 495 technicums provided courses for a total of 8,063 learners across 8 languages. 67.1% spoke English and German 20.6%, together the two languages accounted for 87.7% of participation [13] This concentration is consistent with existing international program and country destination priorities, but it may not reflect local labour demand in the case of the Republic of Korea, Russian-speaking market including labor migration to global cities particularly across North America through pathways such as Jus Soli, Türkiye and other locations such as China and Japan.

A second gap is apparent in planned language hours. The initial vocational track contributed 180 hours, or 30.0% of the suggested 600-hour standard, and the secondary-special track provided 100 hours, or 16.7%; deficits far-reaching up to 420 and 500 hours were observed respectively. However, this should not be construed as claiming equal classroom time must happen for all learners. Route should be driven by Entry level, prior learning, occupation, training intensity and outside testing. It nevertheless suggests that the current general-language part was built first to serve a general language standard suitable for international employment.

Table 2. Operational capacity of qualification-portability components in 2025

Component	Observed capacity	Derived measure	Portability implication
National qualification catalog	461 occupations and 329 qualifications; admissions in	and 71.4% operationalization in	A catalog entry does not by itself provide a teaching team, equipment, delivery, or assessment.
International qualifications classifier	in 16 international occupations and qualifications added for 2025/2026	New portability pathways	Each pathway still needs mapping to destination standards and evidence of recognition.
International and joint programs	47 technicians; occupations; more than 4,000 learners	At least 85 learners per technician, based on reported minimum	Enrollment is growing, but the completion, assessment, and external acceptance require separate reporting.
Selected international pathways	Pearson BTEC in 14 technicians; German-standard nursing in 15 institutions for 758 learners	Pilot-scale concentration	An international brand must be backed by external assessment and a credential employers can read.
Foreign-language access	8,063 learners in 16 technicians across eight languages	516.3 learners per technician	Coverage reaches many institutions, although participation is modest relative to total enrollment.
Language distribution	English 5,407; German 1,662; other six languages 994	67.1%; 20.6%; 12.3%	Language provision should follow verified demand by occupation and destination, not popularity alone.
Instruction intensity	180 hours in the initial track and 100 hours in the secondary-special track; proposed target 600 hours	30.0% and 16.7% of target; gaps of 420 and 500 hours	Learners need diagnostic, occupation-specific preparation followed by external assessment.
Workplace-learning evidence	510 institutions; 14,352 learners; 14,352 employers	67,425 132.2 learners per institution; 4.7 learners per employer	Tasks, hours, equipment, and verified competence should be captured in a portable workplace portfolio.

Table 1.

Source: Author's calculations from administrative materials of the Ministry of Higher Education, Science and Innovation and the Ministry of Employment and Poverty Reduction. Values for international and joint programs are minimum reported counts where the source states 'more than 4,000 learners.'

3.3. A Three-Layer Architecture for Qualification Portability

Figure 1 turns the identified gaps into a sequence of institutional tasks. The recognition-reference layer states what a qualification must mean in the destination system by linking the national level and learning outcomes to occupational standards, licensing and safety rules, and a language threshold. The evidence-production layer then requires the curriculum, workplace portfolio, language assessment, and competency examination to produce comparable proof. Only after those steps does the portable-credential layer assemble an employer-readable supplement, a verifiable digital record, and a documented recognition decision.

The distinction from a recruitment or migration-management chain is deliberate. The model does not treat departure or placement as its final product. Its product is a qualification record that can be interpreted before recruitment and checked after employment begins. For that reason, the same architecture can also serve domestic employers, returning migrants, further education, and career progression within Uzbekistan.

Figure 1. Three-layer architecture for producing portable vocational qualifications

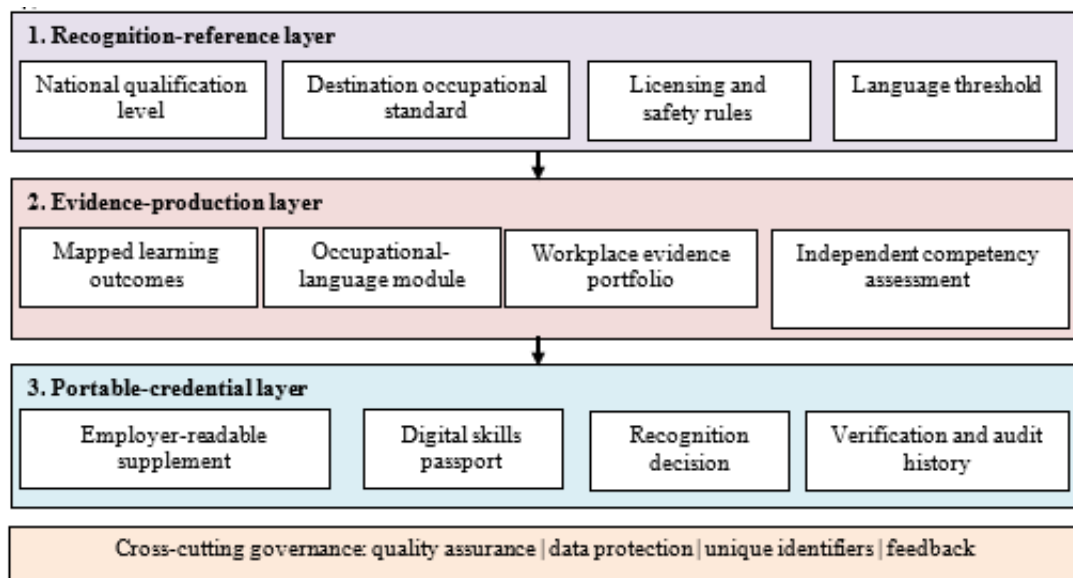


Figure 2.

Source: Developed by the author.

4. Discussion

The results all assert that the issue of portability reverts to the system surrounding a diploma, not just the paper itself. When external decision-makers understand the qualification, can trust that the assessment was made relevant to benchmarks and verify supporting evidence the qualification takes on value across borders. This concept introduces a performative qualifier to the human recipes: training might add productive capacity, but portability determines whether or not that capacity can be acknowledged and compensated in another institutional context. [3, 4] This conclusion also aligns with international vocational policy which prioritizes learning outcomes, employer relevance, quality assurance and transparent pathways. [2]

The reform path of Uzbekistan can be read in two phases. Policy made some essential groundwork on the areas of education, law, and work-based-learning between 2019-2021. Those made in 2024 and 2025 included international qualifications, language and recognition-related functions. The result is that this policy issue has therefore changed. Instead of creating the missing elements earlier; require the elements to talk to each other now. By interoperability we mean that the classifier, curriculum, workplace record, language certificate, competency assessment and foreign-employment platform would all use compatible identifiers and refer to the same learner, occupation, qualification level and destination standard.

The 71.4% operationalization ratio is a cautionary note about conflating capacity for catalogue reforms with delivery. This means simply listing the quarry of a trade certificate is not enough — provided someone can teach that mapped-out curriculum, particularly if they can document practice and perform an assessment others will be comfortable with, it is a portable qualification. As a result, the institutions responsible for every priority international qualification should also keep a “portability file” with the following information: The destination standard, mapped learning outcomes/syllabus, equipment/teacher requirements, language threshold (if applicable), assessment specification and recognition authority along with digital verification method. This file needs to be updated when the destination standard or recognition rules change.

International branding creates visibility, but not automatically recognition. Global Skill Partnership principles likewise treat standards, training, finance, and mobility channels as parts of one investment design rather than as unrelated projects.[18] The BTEC and German-standard pathways are important achievements, yet monitoring should separate four stages that are often reported together: entry into an international curriculum, completion of the intended outcomes, success in an external or independently moderated assessment, and acceptance of the credential by a destination employer or authority. Enrollment alone can overstate portability because external usability is the decisive test.

Language policy illustrates why portability must be occupation-specific. General grammar and everyday conversation do not equip a nurse to follow clinical instructions, an electrician to interpret safety documentation, or a logistics worker to process digital orders and transport records. Movement toward a 600-hour pathway will be useful only when it begins with diagnostic testing and combines general language, occupational terminology, simulated workplace communication, and an external examination. The current concentration in English and German also points to the need for a transparent connection between language provision and verified demand by destination and occupation.

Dual education gives Uzbekistan a strong platform, but the value of workplace learning depends on the evidence it leaves

behind. A portable record should state not only the hours spent at an enterprise but also the tasks completed, equipment used, safety modules passed, supervisor verification, and competencies demonstrated. A standardized digital workplace portfolio would turn practice from an institutional arrangement into proof that can travel with the graduate. This is particularly important where employers trust demonstrated performance more than classroom grades.

Independent assessment is the point at which domestic training can earn external trust. Recognition-of-prior-learning guidance places verifiable evidence and transparent standards at the center of qualification decisions.[19] For priority occupations, assessment specifications should be prepared with sector councils, Uzbek and foreign employers, and competent qualification bodies. Demonstration examinations can be recorded and moderated, while assessment centers should publish examiner requirements, task banks, pass standards, and quality-assurance procedures. Mutual recognition becomes easier to negotiate when the underlying assessment process is visible and auditable.

Evidencing must not only go online with digital, but be connected with the evidence. Uzbekistan has provided education and foreign-employment information systems, but their records have not been combined into a single portable credential yet as per the Ascent. Digital skills passports can be built upon existing public platforms which while having a unique learner identifier (a credential) can also contain elements such as: qualification code mapped outcomes language result as seen in workplace portfolio assessment decision credential status recognition history Employers would have a mechanism to confirm authenticity (by either a secure link or machine-readable code) without being able to access personal information (that remains consent-based and legally protected).

Pilots need to be narrow enough to produce reliable lessons. Partners and destination standards can be identified for entry-level nursing, medical-social care, electrical installation, construction technology, logistics and some broader manufacturing occupations. Migration volume is not the key barometer for success. Several more revealing measures include the share of qualifications with finished mapping files, the percentage of learners with validated workplace portfolios, independent-assessment passing rates; the share of credentials that can be verified digitally; time needed for a recognition decision and worker employment in the occupation for which he/she trained.

Now, some caveats with the index. Documentary coding inherently disaggregates differences in institutional quality and equal weights stipulate that one function is not more dominant over the other. The measurement does not account for employer tolerance, individual learning achievement, compensation, or long-term job matching. A number of the indicators refer to programs started for the 2025/2026 academic year; they show that implementation is underway but are not yet indicators of completion. Coding of occupations against employer surveys, records of location-specific recognition, data at the graduate level and various alternative weighting schemes should be examined in future work.

Despite these caveats, the analysis provides a valuable diagnostic distinction. Migration volume is not the same as qualification portability and should not be an outcome of targeted training management. The filtered value of a credential that is comprehensible and verifiable might yield dividends in the form of structured international employment, foreign-invested businesses located within Uzbekistan, economic return migration, positive career progression or advancement or additional education. And the fact that some will never show up in action to pay for another use is why portability must not go through the lens of a multi-purpose use.

5. Conclusion

Evidence indicates that Uzbekistan has largely constructed the institutional components of portable vocational qualifications, but not yet knitted them together into a consistently reliable recognition chain. Base was extremely fragmented in 2018 up until it reached 91.7 on the documentary index (2025). Far-reaching scale is also apparent in operational information: 461 occupations and capabilities within the national classifier, 47 technicums delivering international or joint programs and eight,063 learners attending extra foreign-language courses.

The last step is to get them all working together as a system. It translates into a portable qualification when destination standards are aligned with learning outcomes; occupational language is examined; work practice is documented; independent evidence of competency is produced and digital evidence can be verified. Hence, the next phase of reform should depart from independent international programs and move towards a single recognition architecture.

So now policy should be fine with occupation-specific portable files, nationally recognised portfolios of work experience, employer-readable credential supplements and assessment tied to the requirements of destination countries. Education and foreign-employment records would fall under the umbrella of a consent-based digital skills passport, which would provide potential employers with a means to validate competence. First introduced in a restricted set of occupations, these measures would keep vocational investment portable between employers, across regions, and nationally.

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Data Availability Statement

The analysis uses aggregated administrative records and the author's documentary coding. The corresponding author may provide the coding record and underlying aggregated tables where disclosure is permitted by the public institutions that supplied the data.

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